

BRITISH COLUMBIA RECORD OF A BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD EGG IN A SPOTTED SANDPIPER NEST

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The Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) is a “brood parasite”, laying its eggs in the nests of host species for the surrogate parent to hatch and rear as its own. This species has been known to “parasitize” over 220 species of North American birds but only 144 of these hosts have actually been recorded to successfully raise cowbird young (Friedmann 1963, Friedmann et al. 1977, Lowther 1993). Usually the host species is a small passerine with an incubation period of about two weeks with altricial nestlings that require constant feeding by parents from hatching to fledging.

Occasionally a female Brown-headed Cowbird will deposit an egg in the nest of an unsuitable host, like a Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) (Mills 1988), Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) (Picman 1986), or even a Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*) (Oring et al. 1997). While the possibility exists that the first two species may rear a cowbird it is unlikely the sandpiper could because their young are precocial and are able to feed themselves soon after hatching.

On 6 June 1984, at the northwestern corner of Beaton Provincial Park on Charlie Lake, about 6 km north of Fort St. John, British Columbia, I flushed an adult Spotted Sandpiper from the upper beach at the edge of a young trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) forest. I was able to easily find the sandpiper’s nest which was a small depression amid sparse weeds. The nest contained three sandpiper eggs and to my surprise a much smaller Brown-headed Cowbird egg (Figure 1). The four eggs were warm. Clearly the sandpiper had been incubating all of them. Since I didn’t revisit the area until a month later, I was unable to determine the outcome of this unusual encounter. I should mention that the Brown-headed Cowbird is a very common species in Beaton Park each year.

This discovery is the second record for British

Columbia (see Campbell et al. 2001). The incidence of finding an egg of the Brown-headed Cowbird in the nest of a Spotted Sandpiper is extremely rare and has only been reported on two other occasions in North America, both in Minnesota (Oring et al. 1997).



Figure 1. Spotted Sandpiper nest containing a single, much smaller egg, of a Brown-headed Cowbird at Beaton Park, BC. 6 June 1984 (Chris Siddle). BC Photo 3678.

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About the Author

Chris remains an active birder and is a Director of the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies. See *British Columbia Nest Record Scheme: 50th annual report – 2004 nesting season*. [Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies Report No. 3, 2005] for a more detailed biography.
